

Martin Heidegger

STUDIES IN
CONTINENTAL
THOUGHT

The Beginning of Western Philosophy

*Interpretation of Anaximander
and Parmenides*

TRANSLATED BY RICHARD ROJCEWICZ



Martin Heidegger

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Western Philosophy**

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and Parmenides

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Translator's Introduction

This is a translation of a lecture course Martin Heidegger offered in the summer semester of 1932 at the University of Freiburg. The German original appeared posthumously in 2012 as volume 35 of the philosopher's *Gesamtausgabe* ("Complete Works").

The editor, in his afterword, identifies the sources he drew on to compose the text. These sources are varied, and the book at times does consequently display unevenness. Not everything is expressed in full sentences, and some few passages are quite cryptic. I did not attempt to alter the diction, for example by supplying tacitly understood verbs. The translation is meant to read to an English ear the way the original does to a German one.

This is the first of the *Gesamtausgabe* volumes to provide the pagination of Heidegger's manuscript. These numbers are placed in the outer margin, with a vertical line to mark the page break. All cross-references in the book are to the manuscript page numbers. The running heads correspond to the *Gesamtausgabe* pagination.

I used square brackets ([]) throughout the book for my insertions into the text, and the few footnotes I introduced are marked "Trans." Braces ({ }) are reserved for the editor's interpolations. German-English and English-German glossaries can be found in the back matter and invite the reader to pursue linguistic connections I was unable to capture. Heidegger himself translates here all the extant fragments of Anaximander and Parmenides, obviating the need for a Greek-English lexicon. Even someone without facility in ancient Greek should have little trouble following the thread of Heidegger's inimitable interpretation of these two so-called pre-Socratics.

Richard Rojcewicz

PART TWO

Interposed considerations

§7. Four objections to the interpretation

- a) The dictum is too far removed and is antiquated, crude and meager, unreal

Appearance—noncompliance—time—limitlessness: are we not floundering here very unsteadily amid **empty words**? With what *right* do the pronouncements at issue present themselves? How do they intend to demonstrate their *truth*? **On what path are they acquired**? Are they not all mere decrees, conceits of a flighty arbitrariness, and not “strict science”? Yet it makes no difference whatever they may be, whether science or philosophy or poetry or something else for which we have no name, since these pronouncements are inaccessible to us, we feel no nearness to them, they are no longer of any concern.

Moreover, if we accept what we had to concede right at the start, namely, that little has been handed down and that this little is even incomplete (cf. below, p. 31), then does not the entire project of seeking out the beginning of Western philosophy become problematic in the highest degree? To be sure. It is accordingly time to pose relentlessly the **objections** to which our project is exposed. We will reduce them to four: l

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1) **Between us and that beginning of Western philosophy lies a temporal span of two and a half millennia.** The world and mankind have radically altered in the interim. That early time is so far removed it must remain inaccessible. Arranging a lecture course such as this will not simply leap over the two thousand five hundred years.

2) Yet even if it were possible, on the basis of other sources, to bridge this gap to some extent, **what would the effort avail us? Only to establish finally that in the meantime philosophy has advanced very far?** What then are we supposed to do with these long-surpassed issues and dicta? We of today especially, for whom the newest can never be “new” enough—how could we more sharply reproach and spurn something than by pointing out it is **antiquated**?

3) It might be conceded that this antiquated thought did continue on in what followed and did determine later developments and can therefore claim significance for itself. Even so, l this significance will vanish as soon as we note **how crude and much too meager these propositions and doctrines look in comparison, for instance, to the inner vitality of the Platonic dialogues** or the compactness and full-

12b

ness of the Aristotelian treatises or especially in comparison to the breadth and complex stratification of the works of Kant or Hegel. We who “know” all this resist such (all too) “primitive,” simple, and insipid truths. And we feel it is almost an affront to be required to take seriously these ever-so-crude attempts made at the beginning—we to whom truth cannot be sufficiently intricate and provocative in order to count as truth at all.

4) Let even this be conceded: the simplicity and crude character of these propositions should not prevent us from pondering their content. In the end, however, does that not signify a mere scholarly occupation which entices us into all possible artifices of interpretation and perhaps momentarily enchants us with previously unfamiliar ideas? Yet it all remains a world of shadows and semblances, so that we do not come upon anything which could affect us of “today,” let alone conclusively and lastingly change us. Instead, it is all unreal, a literary-philological invention, and therefore without any compelling power over us.

That is a compact series of weighty objections: unbridgeable span of time / antiquated / crude and meager / unreal (shadowy). Our project is exposed to such objections provided it intends to be something other than a far-fetched, obsolete, and altogether irrelevant report on a long-vanished age of human history. Can these objections be disabled, perhaps by refuting them with counterarguments?

Yet can this vanished time indeed be expected to return by way of a refutation of objections and become new and fertile and real? In fact, a reality never arises out of the mere refutation of false views. Cf. below.

b) Presuppositions of the objections in a self-delusion

To charge headlong at those objections would be useless without wondering at all about the content and essence of the presuppositions from which the objections arise and draw sustenance. What is speaking out in those objections? It is we ourselves, which is why they seem judicious and pressing. We therefore—we, the way we behave when we say: unbridgeable span of time / antiquated / crude and meager / unreal (shadowy)—we act in the reeling off of these objections as if we were undoubtedly ready to lend an ear to the beginning of Western philosophy. We act as if we were not only ready but naturally also predisposed to let it say something to us. We act as if we were even capable of deciding whether this beginning has something to say to us or not. We even think that such would be an honorable endeavor, and we flatter ourselves on the critical prudence with which we look upon the project of seeking out the beginning. We do all this, but what if we are thereby deluding ourselves? And what if this self-delusion was

one that found it fitting to take shelter behind those objections? Perhaps well-intentioned, but nonetheless a great self-delusion that shelters behind the objections; shelters behind, precisely in order to shelter itself from ever becoming actually exposed to those early times? It is of course a self-delusion.

c) What the self-delusion consists in

What does that self-delusion consist in, one with which we have long been stricken? In the fact that humans have convinced themselves that the old is the antiquated, the antiquated the past, the past what no longer is, and what no longer is, as nonbeing, sheer nullity. What could be more obvious than this conviction that the old is the antiquated, and what is easier to cast off than the antiquated, since indeed, as past, it passes away of itself?

Is this self-delusion accidental? If it is, then how does it come to be so widespread? It derives from a firmly seated *prejudice* about humans and about their relation to history; the prejudice is that this relation consists in and is based on historiological cognitions. We take ourselves to be disposed and authorized, without further ado, to judge what history, and especially the past, can mean to us and is allowed to mean to us.

The four objections stem from a single prejudice, one so well-guarded today that it faces not even the least danger; on the contrary, at most it is increasingly advancing. For what age has ever acquired so many and such varied historiological cognitions as has ours? When were past “cultures” and human types ever rummaged through and psychologically-analytically probed to such an extent? When were these constantly accumulating cognitions ever served up with such a shameful top-dressing than in today’s journalism, a journalism whose very successes do not allow this science to sleep? Must not finally such an excess of historiological cognitions show us the full totality of history and prompt us to believe we had a relation to history! Or is this monstrous amount of historiology precisely what rivets us to the prejudice about our supposedly genuine and authoritative relation to history? Can historiological cognition create at all originally a relation to history? No; on the contrary, historiological cognition is itself possible only on the basis of an originary relation to history. Historiology can explain and expand this relation but can just as much also undermine and slacken it and, above all, can delude us precisely about the endangering, destruction, and thus the complete lack of any basic relation to history.

That is how matters stand today. Therefore, we can without scruples believe ourselves justified in bringing forward objections against the possibility and intrinsic value of the project of seeking out the begin-

ning of Western philosophy and also justified in finding these objections self-evident. Indeed, we even believe we are attempting to be especially critical and serious when we strive to make such objections heard.¹ |

d) The distance from the beginning of Western philosophy

Assuming, however, it could actually and convincingly be declared that our purported relation to history is merely a prejudice and that consequently we lack any *intrinsic* claim to be competent to put forth these objections, indeed, that they have been put forth only from not understanding history and from **a negative relation** [*ein Un-verhältnis*] to it—assuming all this, then would the objections not have to collapse, whereby refutation of them becomes superfluous? Certainly; but what would then be gained? We would not have eliminated the objections by way of a refutation but, instead, would have disabled them in advance through a withdrawal of their ground.

Yet will the temporal distance of two and a half millennia that separates us from the beginning become less thereby? Will the beginning become less antiquated thereby? Through the dismissal of the objections do we attain the positive result that the beginning is of some immediate concern to us? Can such reflections, no matter how subtle, simply conjure up an actual relation to history and to the beginning? Two and a half millennia—the myriad changes in the world and in humanity indeed cannot be undone by such reflections, quite apart from the circumstance that we still do not see to what end that should happen. **Are not beginnings rather in each case there precisely so that after them everything moves away from them?**

We remain shut off from the “beginning,” whether or not we refute the cited objections, whether or not we wonder about the presuppositions on which they are based, whether or not we simply disregard them. No artifices of interpretation can transport us over this gap of millennia, no so-called empathy can magically replace something by-gone with something real.—*That is how matters stand*, if we stay sober and do not fool ourselves. **We must face the fact of our continuous movement away from the beginning.** More precisely, we must face the fact of our *detachment* from the beginning. And is it not a splendid thing to bow soberly to the facts, especially when they are as indis-

1. *But what if the converse?*—Historiology *in* history and historiology allowing us in, but just as much slackening, undermining, destroying, and thereby still deluding. If then this prejudice nevertheless holds sway, the consequence is a *dis-empowering* and a *negative relation* to history. *Out of this*, the objections against a relation to history!!

putable as the constantly increasing distance of the present from the past, our movement away from it?

Yet the facts are also peculiar in not being exhausted by what we casually and obviously ascertain about them. To be sure, we usually believe that in this way we possess what the fact is. We do not take into account, and have no eye for, what in the end could be the case with **the so-called fact.**

§8. The negative relation to the beginning

a) The wanderer and the spring

Yet what then could this indubitable temporal gap between us of to-day and the beginning of philosophy still further be? What concealed possibility could still lurk in this naked fact? Let us indicate this possibility first by way of **an image.**

A wanderer in an arid region must distance himself more and more from the spring at which he first and last drew water. Viewed soberly, his distance from this spring is thereby increasing. He leaves the spring behind, and with the increasing distance he loses his orientation; the spring in the end lies inaccessible far behind. Assume the wanderer then dies of thirst. Why did he die? Presumably because at too great a distance from the spring **he no longer had a relation to it.** Yet how is the too great distance from the spring no longer a relation to it? At a sufficiently great distance, does this relation cease to be a relation, or is the excessively great distance from the spring **always still a relation to it, a negative relation** but still precisely a relation and even one that is hardly inconsequential? Does the wanderer somehow get loose of the spring in the increasing distance? Does he step away from a relation to it? The opposite is the case. Does not the spring pursue him more importunately the closer he comes to dying of thirst? Indeed, soberly calculated, is it not precisely the very far distant spring that lets him perish? Therefore does not the wanderer in his roaming and advancing come to **perish because of nothing other than this spring?** An image.

What if now in our relation to the beginning of Western philosophy we were such advancing wanderers! What if not just today but since long ago the advancement of Western philosophy were a constant, ever-greater perishing because of its beginning! And what if in this history of perishing—precisely in it—the beginning pursued and importuned the one advancing! **And what if in this pursuing and importuning the beginning were constantly there in the closest proximity,** a quite different proximity than could be pointed to by the image of

the spring and the wanderer! And what if this closest proximity of the beginning had to remain *concealed* precisely on account of the advancement!

b) The closest proximity of the concealed beginning

How do matters now stand with the naked fact that in advancing we distance ourselves from the beginning more and more? This fact has changed; it has become richer, even if merely with regard to possibility.

The fact of distance includes the possibility that the relation between us and the beginning is a negative relation, a negative relation thanks to which the beginning stands concealed in our closest proximity.

This fact not only stands before us, we also stand in it—thus in the possibility that the beginning has the closest proximity to us. But then the question of whether we can or cannot leap over these two and a half millennia is a “bagatelle” compared to the question of whether we experience and see that the beginning pursues us, and importunes us, out of the closest proximity. The temporal distance of more than two thousand years, this gigantic span of time, would in its significance be nothing compared to this negative relation of nearness. |

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The invoking of the mere fact of this temporal distance would then at most be a deception which we only strengthen with the alleged sobriety. In the end, we must decide at least to look into the face of the possibility of the dangerous closest proximity of the concealed beginning. We must learn that here and in general in the naked fact of history the essential is hidden, that only apparently does the naked fact constitute the actual happening of history, and that the representation of history becomes even more destitute when so-called ideas are tacked on to so-called facts and ideology is used to help explain history. It has not yet been seen that this “ideologism” is the worst positivism and that the latter is even still dominant.

c) The inability to do anything with the beginning

We must therefore face the possibility that our relation, or negative relation, to the beginning of Western philosophy does not primarily depend on the extent of the intervening temporal span (cf. the objections!). In other words, it could be that we would remain as far removed from the beginning as we are today even if the beginning happened only a decade or a year ago; it could be that in our negative relation to the beginning we are so very *obdurate* that not only are we simply unable to experience and grasp its proximity but do not *want* to.

We must face the possibility that the beginning is not the old in the sense of the antiquated but that we are so very antiquated that we can

no longer understand a beginning—and especially cannot understand when we invoke the advanced and the contemporary.

We must then also face the possibility that this inceptuality of the beginning is not the elementary and primitive, that what we call primitiveness is nothing other than the simplicity proper to everything great, and that we do not grasp this simplicity because we do not see greatness on account of our having long ago become too small. For only what is itself great, or at least in an essential sense knows about greatness, can in turn encounter the great.

In the end, we must face the possibility that the beginning, which no longer seems to be of concern to us, importunes us to the highest degree out of the closest proximity, that it constantly does everything with us, and that without it we cannot do the least thing. That we are no longer able to confront this importuning of the beginning is our unsurpassable cluelessness and harmlessness with which we are washed away in history (whereby the age of historiology still means such an age would stand in a living relation to history).

To put it succinctly, we, the obdurate, antiquated, small, and harmless, must face the possibility that it is not the beginning in its peculiarity which prevents us from coming close to it, but that we ourselves—indeed unwittingly—prevent ourselves from seeking out the beginning. This obstacle consists then in nothing less than our inability to do anything with the beginning.

Only one who *can* do something with the beginning² disposes of the inner preparation for the project to seek out the beginning.

Therefore when we said at the start of the lecture course, “We want to seek out the beginning of Western philosophy,” that was not an innocuous remark and an incitement to a more or less amusing or boring engagement with a few scraps of old texts but instead, rightly understood, is the will to gain mastery in some way over our inability to do anything with the beginning.

Where do we now stand—and how do matters therefore stand with our project? |

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§9. Meditation on the “current situation”

- a) Who is asking about the beginning?
Toward determining the “we”

“We” are supposed to be the ones who prevent ourselves from doing anything with the beginning? *Who is actually meant by this “we”?* Not us as the ones here and now. Nor those many who according to their

2. i.e., has something done *to* him. {Trscpt¹}

personal aims and occupations consider a knowledge of ancient philosophy superfluous. Nor those who indeed have the desire but lack the required tools. **It is we, not those accidentally here and now, but we as the successors of a long history of the human impotence to actually do something with that beginning.** We—these successors, but these at the same time as *prior*, as the predecessors of the future ones.

We, the succeeding predecessors of that history which has done something with the beginning of Western philosophy, of that history which constantly happens in concealment *while* “we” perish on that beginning. **If we no longer succeed in coming into the proximity of the greatness of the beginning, then everything is denied to us—even this, to perish with greatness and composure.**

Whether we will do something with the beginning or will perish on it, in any case what is first is to experience the proximity of the beginning in our Dasein. That includes a previous effort to indicate the beginning in our proximity. And that requires us to *involve ourselves in ourselves*. Such a task is nevertheless exposed to tempting misunderstandings which could severely hinder the correct grasp of the following considerations. The misunderstandings concern the question: who are the “we,” the ones we are supposed to let “ourselves” be involved in?

It was already intimated that in the following when we speak of us and our Dasein, we are speaking and questioning out of a long and continuous backward glance and out of a broad forward glance. Thus—glancing forward and back—we overlook the present. The latter shrinks into nothingness. As long as something of the present mixes itself in, that is insignificant.

b) The concept of generation as off the path

We speak of us and do not mean individuals, or the individual, and even less the so-called generation. It has lately become usual to speak of “oneself” no longer as an individual but as belonging to a generation. Self-staring now happens generation-wise. One thinks in terms of “generations,” one makes comparison according to generations. And it seems one has thereby arrived, beyond individuals, at a denser historical reality.

In truth, an unhistorical, frivolous conflation of individuals and types of groups, the “calculation” with typologies and ideologies, has thereby merely been expanded to massive proportions. The impotence for historical Dasein has increased. The self-delusion about the relation to history has hardened even further. The fact that today everyone speaks of historicity is not evidence against this. For of what does one not speak today?

This unbridled, apish rummaging around in one's own generation and in further expanses, in the so-called current situation, is becoming downright revolting. From this, however, one can if necessary maintain a safe distance.

What is fatal is that the excited fussing over the current situation is becoming the innermost corruption, since it exacerbates a basic delusion, namely, the opinion that | meditation on the current situation is the beginning of serious questioning and that here would lie the much-named but never carried out "decision." This procedure of considering the situation, including the evaluation of the procedure, constitutes merely an arbitrary and also perverse transfer of the attitude of moral self-reflection onto the relation to history and onto history itself. But history in its essence is all the more denigrated and corrupted when morals are mixed in. This running after the situation feigns proximity to the reality of history but is indeed the most unhistorical behavior imaginable.

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c) The determination of the current
situation by Friedrich Nietzsche

The portrayal of the current situation, undertaken these days again and again and in the most varied forms, is not only intrinsically perverse but is also superfluous and has long been so. **Already two life-times ago the current situation was determined—by Nietzsche.** Moreover, it could indeed have been determined only then and only by him. The respective current situation cannot at all be discovered through the amusing portrayal of contemporary trends, fashions, and opinions; it is visible only to a creative view in advance, i.e., to a view that clearly sees the essential task and that is preserved and nourished by a long view out of the past.

Such a determination of the historical circumstances, with the depth and breadth of Nietzsche, is something that occurs only once and is based on a unique necessity; it is unrepeatable. The accomplishment of that work was paid for by the prodigious fate of a great man. Such a task cannot be carried out incidentally, as a parergon; it demands the entire inner and outer history of a man of Nietzsche's rank.

The complete self-delusion in which contemporary humanity, as contemporary, gaily splashes about is perhaps testified most clearly in the fact that Nietzsche, despite—indeed because of—the endless literature about him, is still not understood. Only a few are starting today to surmise something of the task and duty to grasp, i.e., to make effective, Nietzsche's fate as the basic happening of our most inward history. To be sure, that signifies something completely other than becoming "representatives" of Nietzsche's philosophy. No real phi-

losophy can have representatives, provided such philosophy is truly understood. The “representatives” are always the ones who understand nothing.

Until we place ourselves in position, out of the power of a future, i.e., in the power of the past, to let the present disappear, or, in brief, as long as we are not successful in this essential transformation of the essence of time, we will not come to know authentically what we mean in saying “we.”

It can now only be anticipated: we—not as persons of today but, instead, as succeeding predecessors of a concealed history.

We want to seek out the beginning of Western philosophy. A condition is our being able in general to do something with the beginning. That requires experiencing the proximity of the beginning. That in turn requires a reference to the possible proximity of the beginning *in our Dasein*. And for that, we must involve ourselves in ourselves, which means neither dissecting ourselves psychologically-analytically nor telling amusing tales about the current situation. |

§10. *The grounding utterance of Being*

a) The characterization of the beginning

How are we to *indicate* the proximity of the beginning in our *Dasein*? By what can the beginning become *recognizable* to us? Without a sufficiently sure and clear characterization, we might easily lose our way here. What have we learned up to now from our previous considerations of the beginning? We “know” the pronouncement of Anaximander, whereby we are now taking no. 1 and 2 together. “Know”? How so? Have we not ourselves subsequently placed in doubt our understanding of the content of this pronouncement, inasmuch as we even lack the conditions for such an understanding? Thereby the pronouncement indeed becomes a most problematic characterization of the beginning.

Should the entire interpretation therefore be retracted? No; but we must confess that its previous confirmation is insufficient, and its further justification is reserved for a later occasion. This does not exclude our taking from the pronouncement something that can characterize the beginning. And for that we do not now need to appeal to its most proper, innermost content, which might indeed be controversial. We will not take anything from the pronouncement, but we will take it more completely. We will now take only that in the pronouncement which “lies forth” uncontroversially and is, as it were, within easy reach. And what is that? The following: the pronouncement speaks

about τὰ ὄντα, beings, by way of saying something of the Being of beings, and what is said about beings seeks in some way to ground why beings must be as they are (cf. the words γὰρ and ἀρχή). In short:

The pronouncement is a grounding utterance of Being, about beings. That characterizes uncontroversially the oldest testimony to Western philosophy, consequently to the *beginning*, so far as we know. This latter reservation is imperative, in view of the provisionally still possible objection that the oldest preserved testimony does not necessarily concern the *first* beginning. The oldest testimony may very well be younger than the actual beginning; indeed this latter is perhaps not testified at all. A question which to be sure is only apparently of great bearing.

b) The pronouncement as an answer to a question

Therefore as far back as we can go, this is what is peculiar to the beginning: the grounding utterance of Being, about beings. We may take this as a provisional characterization of the beginning. What is dealt with there in particular is the “limitless,” compliance and noncompliance, time, and appearance—we do not want to forget all this hereafter, but at first we will place no further demands on it.

Yet is this utterance which is of Being and about beings merely a *characterization* of the beginning? Is not this utterance the beginning *itself*? Even if it can be said with some justification that the pronouncement is not only the oldest testimony from the sphere of the beginning but is the actual first beginning itself, we still must not see in this pronouncement the authentic beginning. Why not? We take from the pronouncement: it is a *grounding* utterance. The grounding utters the ground in saying: “therefore” and “for this reason” Being has the mentioned characters. But to announce the “therefore” and the “for this reason” means to speak by referring back to a “wherefore?” and a “why?” and so is to be related to a question. Such an utterance is called an *answer*.

The pronouncement is not simply an assertion; it is an answer. The content of the pronouncement may be ever so controversial in itself and also in its interpretation, but what is beyond controversy is that, as an answer, it is essentially rooted in a questioning. The beginning therefore resides not in the pronouncement as such, but in the questioning to which the pronouncement is a response. The grounding utterance, as answering with the ground, already contains the questioning. The full content of the pronouncement is not at all grasped if this questioning is left unheeded. For this questioning is not merely the way it comes to be answered, the mere mode of origination of the pronouncement, which could be left out once the pronouncement had

originated. On the contrary, the dictum does not in the least speak as itself unless it speaks as an answer, i.e., unless it is uttered at the same time and above all as a question.

Consequently, if the pronouncement is communicated merely as an assertion and is transmitted in such communication, then the communication remains essentially incomplete. Even if the pronouncement is discussed ever so extensively and is compared to other pronouncements, it is still not actually communicated, for in this way it is still impossible to take part in its full content, i.e., to take part in its questioning. As long and as often as the pronouncement is proposed and repeated merely as an assertion, the communication remains essentially incomplete, and furthermore this incompleteness produces an outright perversion of the character of the pronouncement. In that case, the questioning expressed here, provided it is remarked in the least, remains something contingent and all too obvious, in which one need not further involve oneself.

c) Questioning as a questioning that discloses Being

Only if we partake in the questioning expressed in the pronouncement do we grasp the latter's inceptuality, its beginning-character. As a mere assertion, the pronouncement is not at all a beginning, but is at most the end of a train of thoughts that is as negligible, once the result is given, as the scaffolding once the house is standing. Accordingly, when we speak of the "beginning of Western philosophy," we do not mean the dicta and pronouncements that lie there "at the beginning," i.e., | in those early times; instead, we mean the act of beginning itself, that which possibly expresses itself in such dicta. We mean the beginning as an *occurrence*, not the first, detached, deposited result, behind which we can go no further back. *The beginning is thus an act of beginning in the mode of a questioning.* In our search for a characterization of the beginning, the essence of the beginning has become more precisely determined. The beginning as act of beginning; the act of beginning as a questioning; the questioning as a questioning that discloses Being; the questioning as the *question of Being* [*die Seinsfrage*]. Can this questioning be characterized more precisely? Initially, only to the extent that we know the appertaining answer—the pronouncement. This was ultimately grasped as: the grounding utterance of Being, about beings.

The questioning maintains itself in the domain of that *about* which the answer is given. It is to beings that we turn, asking what they are. Beings are the interrogated [*das Befragte*]. In what regard are they interrogated? In regard to that which determines beings as beings, in regard to their Being. We ask after that. Being is that which we ask after [*das Ge-fragte*]. We see, however: the saying is a grounding ut-

terance of Being. What is announced is not simply that Being is such and such, but *why* it has this character. The questioning of the “what” unfolds into a questioning of the ground of the “what.” The questioning is a seeking out of the essence-ground, a grounding of Being. This grounding question of the Being of beings we call the questioning that discloses Being [*das Erfragen des Seins*].

d) The essence of questioning; various modes of questioning

The act of beginning: the questioning that discloses the Being of beings or, as we say in brief: the question of Being. We have thereby acquired a characterization of the beginning. Where we encounter this, namely, the question of Being and related matters, there we are in the proximity of the beginning. Yet what is this itself, the question of Being? It is now to us merely a name. What a question is, in general, is usually accepted by us as a matter of course, at least inasmuch as we can always easily pose questions, i.e., carry out a questioning, and can lay claim to questioning as such. E.g., these everyday questions: What is occurring there? Who won? When is the exam? Where will the seminar be held? Has the book appeared? Why was the lecture canceled? (Cf. below, *p. 25 middle*.) Modes of questioning that can be formally called who-what-when-where-questions; whether-questions; why-questions. In the forms of these questions, we can endlessly interrogate things of all sorts.

Not only can we do so, we do so constantly, and not merely or even primarily when we express questions explicitly in interrogative sentences and use interrogative words such as “where” and “why.” We often question implicitly, especially when we inquire³ alone and in questioning seek and secure directions for our behavior at the time. Often, however, the question is an inquiry [*Anfragen*] in the presence of others and becomes a co-questioning with them. In those cases, we can also express our questioning through a mere way of looking or manifest our questioning whether such and such is the case through a shrug of the shoulders. (Doubt-question!)

In a quite different respect, there are questions that arise fleetingly and are no sooner answered; and also questions that persist: the social question, the Eastern Front question, the military question, the “Homeric question” of classical philology, and, especially in Bavaria, the question of the price of beer.

In another respect again, we can distinguish investigative questions, suitability questions, and figurative questions. To the first class belong all those questions that interrogate the interrogated matter itself. The case of the suitability question is different; here it is asked

3. [Reading *anfragen* for *anfangen*, “begin.”—Trans.]

only whether the “interrogated” person understands the question and can answer. And figurative (rhetorical) questions are questions only in their linguistic formulation; in their sense, they are declarations, attempts to persuade, requests, and the like.

In still another respect, there are these widely divergent forms: semblant questions and fateful ones. What is interrogated and asked after in a semblant question is not originally and immediately appropriated; it is not opened and illuminated by this questioning but is instead obscured and disguised. The makeup of such questions simulates participation in the matter but produces only groundlessness. Such semblant questions (example: idealism or realism?) can generate an entire literature, and there are scholars and scholarly trends and schools whose sole activity consists in propagating semblant questions and thereby complicating things to the point of unrecognizability and assuring the continuation of the groundlessness of their scholarship. There are other—rare—scholars who with a single question simplify the matter to its essentials and thereby bring about an essential advance. As to what a fateful question is, let us for now not speak about it further.

This rough survey is only meant to provide some indication of the phenomenon of the question and questioning. In the background, of course, lies the task of clarifying what sort of comportment questioning is in general and whether indeed it can be called an autonomous comportment. Furthermore, the task is to ground how something like questioning is possible; what sort of being is the only one that can question and even *must* question? Is it the case that gods cannot question, not because for some reason they would be incapable of it, but because they ought not at all to be capable of it if they are indeed gods? Is it that animals cannot question, because they do not at all need to question, to be sure for different reasons than gods? Is it that human beings can question, indeed must question, and consequently only humans can leave something unquestioned, specifically such that by this non-questioning they at the same time decide what they make of themselves and how they are to be taken? These are various questions about questioning that have for the most part never been properly posed, let alone resolved. Here belongs also the question of how and within what limits questioning can itself be questioned.

With this prospect, let us return to *our* question or, more prudently expressed, to the question occasioning these comments, namely, the question of Being. What sort of question is that? We already said: beings are to be interrogated with respect to their Being, and Being, so questioned, is to be grounded in the ground of its possibility. We said:

18 Being is to be disclosed in questioning. |

e) The question of Being as the most
originary, first, and last question

Under which of the above-designated forms of questioning does the question of Being fall? We ask: what are beings? A what-question. And we are also asking: why does Being have this whatness? A why-question. Consequently, the combination of a what-question and a why-question. Let us wait and see!

Consider this example: we suddenly hear a rustling in the hedges and ask: what is moving there, what is that? A what-question! Whereto is our questioning directed? Perhaps to the individual animal presumably moving about. Yet perhaps it is only a gust of wind, blowing in the leaves. What is it? A blackbird or a finch, a squirrel or a lizard? Consider another example of a what-question: what is a book? Each time, we are asking “what is it?” yet are doing so in very different respects. In the first case, we want to know not what a blackbird or a squirrel is but, rather, whether an individual of this species is moving about here. What is it, such that this noise is occurring? We are seeking, guided by possible species of things that could be moving here, what individual, actually what species, is involved. In the second case, on the contrary, we are asking not whether the present individual thing is a book but, instead, what a book is. In the former case, we seek what the X is to be determined as; in the latter, the present thing is determined as a book, and our questioning is directed to the determinate thing itself, to its “what,” its whatness.

The question of Being is manifestly an essence-question. What are beings, in what does their essence consist?⁴ In their Being! Is that an answer? We will then ask at once: what is the essence of Being? This essence-question has various levels. But that peculiarity holds for every essence-question. What is a book? Answer: a use-object. Apart from the fact that this is not a sufficient determination of the essence of a book, though perhaps a necessary one, we can immediately proceed to ask: what is the essence of a use-object, and so on. Yet how far does this “and so on” go? Especially with regard to the question of what is Being. Beyond Being, “is” there at all something still possible to which our questioning could be directed and which could be set forth and secured as the ground of the essence of Being? Something which could be fixed as something that *is*? Or, if we go beyond Being, do we not immediately and inevitably come to nothingness, with which at once every possibility of a ground is lost and there is

4. “Essence,” essence-question—not every what-question an essence-question: what is the price of the trip?

no longer ground but only abyss? (Difference between groundless and abyssal questioning.)

The question of Being would then be an essence-question, but a preeminent one: a grounding question which, in going back to the ground, necessarily and not accidentally reaches the abyss. Even more: the question of Being is not merely *one* essence-question among others, not merely a preeminent one, but is *the* essence-question in the sense that it secures the general possibility of any essence-question, for essence means the whatness of a being: whatness a mode of Being. If Being as such is not disclosed in questioning and is not grounded, then every essence-question remains ungrounded and obscure, no matter how copiously and unrestrainedly we direct our questioning to the essence of some thing.

Finally, the question of Being is not only *the* essence-question pure and simple but is altogether the most originary, first, and last question, the question directed simultaneously to that in which the possibility of each and every question is rooted.⁵ The first and last, deepest and broadest, thus not at all a semblant question but, to the extreme contrary, a—indeed *the*—fateful question “of humanity.” Indeed not of humanity as such and in general, which is never and nowhere, but of the humanity whose history was co-begun, in its beginning, by way of the asking of the question of Being. Yet precisely because this question is the question of this humanity, it is also the most forgotten question. And because the question of Being is the most originary one, it also remains commonly disguised and suppressed by semblant questions. These latter are especially widespread today in everything that goes by the name of “ontology.”

§11. *The actual asking of the question of Being*

a) The question of Being becoming problematic

Fine—this then is the question of Being! We have gained all sorts of information *about* it but have not experienced it itself. Despite all our discussions about questioning in general and about the various interrogative forms and the place of the question of Being amid them, despite the preeminence of the question of Being over and against all other questions, despite all this the question of Being remains nebulous to us and ultimately no more than a word. And it will remain so until we set out and ask this question; only in that way, as an asked

5. Thus wrongly asked if seek to encase it in fixed forms—the very form of questioning—to be grounded only on the basis of the question of Being.